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Legislation designed to provide developing countries with incentives to preserve coral reefs and marine ecosystems was passed by the House on Tuesday by voice vote.

The bill (HR 2185), sponsored by Republican Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, would expand a program under the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (PL 105-214) to offer debt relief to countries that protect coral reefs or marine ecosystems.

The Foreign Affairs Committee approved the bill by voice vote July 31.

Current law allows countries to accumulate relief from U.S. loans in exchange for protecting tropical forest land. Each dollar spent on those environmental projects — often a low priority in the developing world — translates into a dollar of debt relief.

The measure would add coral reefs to areas eligible for protection under the program and would reauthorize it through 2010, which Kirk said would be a boon to Caribbean nations.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a companion bill (S 2020) on Sept. 11.